



KEEPING YOU INFORMED
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How is Your Organization's Creative Tension?

We aimed high. Now what?

It takes courage, commitment and confidence for a senior leadership team to step up and lead an organization to the next level of performance. At the outset, this entails creating a unifying vision for the organization, confronting current reality, and establishing stretch goals and high expectations in order to drive the change needed to grow into the vision.

The beginning of the process can be stimulating and even exhilarating. However, when it comes time to develop detailed action plans and begin taking the first critical steps of implementation, organizations can hit a wall, and become demoralized and demobilized. The mindset quickly shifts from exhilaration and enthusiasm about future possibilities and potential benefits to: "We aimed high. Now what?" In his book The Fifth Discipline Peter Senge described this challenging condition as creative tension.

What is creative tension, and why is it important?

Creative tension is the energy that is created when we have a clear picture of our desired vision (what we want) and our current reality (where we are now relative to what we want). When we become aware of the gaps between where we are and where we want to be, we have a natural tendency to seek a resolution between the two.

Imagine a rubber band stretched between your hands. One hand holds your vision, and the other, your current reality. You pull your hands apart, creating tension. The further you pull your hands apart, the greater the tension. How will you deal with that tension? Will you hold onto your vision and pull toward it, or let go of your vision, and pull toward the current reality?

When faced with this tension, some people have a tendency to slip into a state of high anxiety, and become "stressed out." They feel worried, sad, discouraged, powerless, or hopeless. When they confront the gap, they relieve the tension by abandoning the vision, lowering their standards, giving up, or even leaving the organization.

But for others, the gap between the vision and the current reality is a source of energy. The gap creates the need for action to move toward the vision. It becomes a source of creative energy, or creative tension. These people are able to face current reality, see different options, creatively solve problems, take bold action, and encourage and energize others to move toward the vision.

Every day, individuals, teams and organizations face a choice in how to reduce the gap. They may either 1.) Give into the emotional tension, lower their standards, and surrender the vision, or 2.) Hold onto the vision, and use the gap between the vision and current reality to generate the energy they need to overcome the status quo and move forward.

The ability of leaders to recognize the dynamics of creative tension, and the challenges, choices, and consequences involved can spell the difference between a high performing and a mediocre organization. As leaders go (or don't go), the organization follows.

Ways to leverage creative tension to achieve results

What are ways leaders can harness and leverage creative tension in order to achieve and sustain higher levels of performance? Following are a few tips and techniques.

First, acknowledge that creative tension produces both positive and uncomfortable feelings and behaviors. Recognize that creative tension is a normal, natural and necessary part of making progress. Understand that it produces both anxiety and motivation. Recognize how you and others feel about it and react to it. For example, do you dwell on complaining about the current situation, and blaming others for it, or do you focus on finding opportunities to improve, and seeking fresh ideas and solutions? Instead of avoiding creative tension, accept it. Explain the process of creative tension to others, and help them understand and accept it.

Second, focus on becoming personally energized by the gap between the vision and current reality. This involves investing the time to clearly explain the vision to others, how the organization will be better, and how it will benefit everyone involved. It also involves having the courage to tell the truth about the current reality without sugar-coating it or understating it. Your role is to reframe your current reality. Is it a series of roadblocks for your team to overcome and share a sense of accomplishment about? Or is it an insurmountable mountain of problems? You must show personal leadership in challenging the status quo, encouraging others, and demonstrating by your actions that you are committed to the vision, and willing to make the needed changes.

Third, find a balance of creative tension that challenges the organization, but doesn't overwhelm it. It's impossible to know all the answers and solve all the organization's problems at once. It's a journey that takes time. Enlist the leadership team and key people in breaking down your current reality into manageable chunks or pieces that can be realistically addressed and properly resourced. Produce a series of visible results over time that people can take pride in.

Fourth, create an environment that encourages the organization to embrace creative tension. Creating the right environment begins with you. Do you take the situation and yourself so seriously, and dwell on mistakes and failures to such an extent that others are discouraged from even trying? Or, do you personally set a tone that encourages people to learn, discover, grow and improve? Do you take the time to celebrate successes along the way? Do you share the limelight, and recognize and reward individuals and teams for taking risks and coming up with solutions? Are you an effective role model for how you want others to approach the challenge? Are you encouraging the organization to follow your lead in moving toward the vision by personally explaining the vision, confronting current reality, challenging the status quo and taking positive action?

Fifth, continuously build your organization's capacity and capability to leverage creative tension. Look for leaders and key people both inside and outside your organization who have a talent for effectively leveraging creative tension. Keep an eye out for best practices that work. Name an internal trainer and coach to document best practices, and be responsible for building these skills throughout your organization.

You can strengthen your organization by making creative tension a source of positive energy and performance improvement instead of letting it become an energy drain.

Our mission is facilitating organizational transformation and performance improvement. If you would like to explore practical ways to help your organization effectively leverage your creative tension, or discuss other aspects of improving organizational effectiveness, please contact us. © 2011 by Jeffrey H. Bracken, Bracken and Associates. All rights reserved.